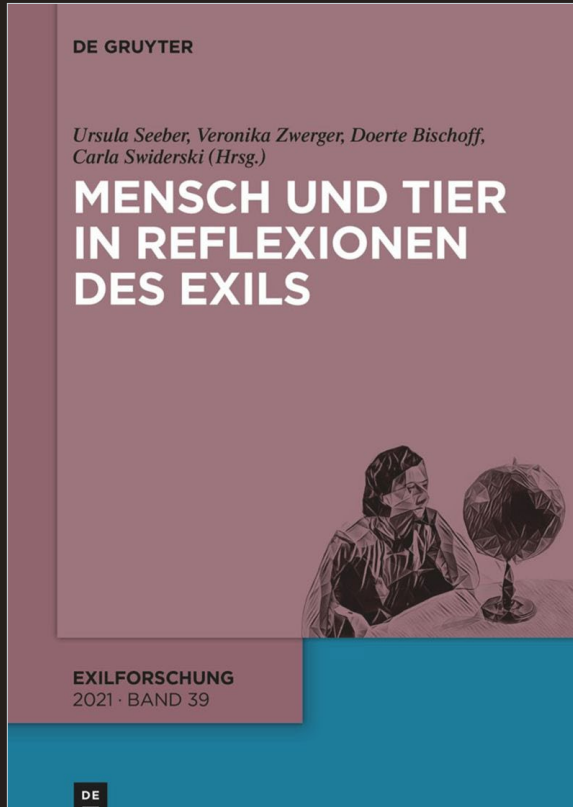


BOOK REVIEW

Animals and Exile

Peter Arnds



Review of:

Ursula Seeber, Veronika Zwerger, Doerte Bischoff, and Carla Swiderski, eds. *Mensch und Tier in Reflexionen des Exils*. Exilforschung 39. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021. viii + 408 pp.; 51 b&w, 20 colour illus. €39.95 (paper & ebook).

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This book focuses on the connections between human exile and nonhuman animals, on aspects of dehumanization, on animals as companion species during the searches humans undertake to find sanctuaries, and on the cultural representation of human–animal relationships under totalitarian rule, specifically of Jews driven into exile during the Third Reich. The various highly readable chapters explore how home, exile, and the return from exile configure in view of migrating animals in literature and film; they furthermore highlight how animals become companions during exile, allowing those exiled to cope with and work through their trauma of expulsion; and, finally, they engage with a rhetoric of dehumanization in the concentration camps.

The cultural and biopolitical history of dehumanization teaches us that certain animal figures have been used more than others for the purposes of delegitimizing human subjectivity. In the European Middle Ages, for example, those committing heinous crimes were often expelled and abandoned to the state of nature, where they would be characterized as wolves. Nowadays, undocumented migrants who leave their homes in search of sanctuaries around the globe have been figured as “swarms” of insects (David Cameron) or even “cockroaches” (Katie Hopkins) by state leaders and the populist right alike. Contemporary world literature has seen an increasing trend in representing migration in terms of human–animal relations. Authors such as Francisco Cantù in *The Line Becomes a River* (2018), Sarah Hall in *The Wolf Border* (2015), or Norbert Scheuer in *Winterbienen* (Winter Bees, 2019) and *Die Sprache der Vögel* (2015, English translation *The Language of Birds*, 2017) use animals—wolves, bees, or migratory birds crossing Afghanistan—in the narrative contexts of war, trauma, exile, and migration. They do so in order to contrast the violent global scenarios created by humans with the “natural” world of animals.

One of the chief purposes of *Mensch und Tier in Reflexionen des Exils* [Humans and Animals in Reflections on Exile] is to highlight the benevolent effects of animals on traumatized humans in exile. It achieves this goal through a series of multi-faceted analyses. The

chapters include such fascinating material as Friederike Middelhoff's essay on the metaphors of migratory birds in German Romantic literature. Middelhoff shows how birds function as tropes for exile, wandering and the return home, as well as the binary of animal instinct versus human intentionality. While the focus of this book is on German culture, there are also some unique and highly original analyses of visual art. Heike Klapdor's evocative reading of *Lassie Come Home* (1943), for example, interprets the film as a reflection of Jewish exile in light of the Holocaust. This is ground-breaking material, as is Joela Jacobs's chapter on how the Nazis' politics of racial hygiene and Aryan superiority extended to an ideological abuse of species such as rabbits, bees, and other insects in children's literature.

All chapters probe the blurred and shifting boundaries between humans and animals, from the ostensible contradictions between the Nazis' caring treatment of some animals while they slaughtered millions of humans to the role of the werewolf in coming to terms with the trauma of expulsion and exile in Curt Siodmak's film *The Wolf Man*. I read Brigitte Mayr's and Michael Omasta's chapter on the wolf man with heightened interest, as its cultural history of werewolves in the context of the exile and persecution of Jews and Gypsies advances existing scholarship on wolves, migration, and matters of race, a topic I have likewise explored in my writing.

Several chapters focus on the roles animals play in processes of social integration during exile. Here again, we can find some highly original documentation, such as Katja Zaich's chapter on the persecuted Jews who hid inside the Amsterdam Zoo during the German occupation of the Netherlands, living next to the cages and working closely with the animals. For several authors here, such as Anthony Grenville and Burcu Dođramacı, animals even become the protectors of human life, as they offer opportunities for humans to work through trauma. The book draws heavily on Donna Haraway's concept of companion species, particularly in the chapters by Jennifer Taylor, Lisa Rettl, and Barbara Weidle, which mark the benefits of the presence of animals in the lives of traumatized refugees such as Charlotte Bondy, Wilhelm Marbach, or Erna Pinner. It is another

strength of this volume that it describes in detail the biographies of these exiled artists.

Mensch und Tier in Reflexionen des Exils is also unique in that it features two appendices on the boundaries between humans and animals, one consisting of reviews of similar studies, the other presenting four topic-related short stories. Lore Segal's story "Death of the Water Bug" in particular raises the question: which animals get privileged as companion species? To my mind, the story reflects what, in his book *The Wild Ones*, Jon Mooallem has described as the beauty factor or cuddliness factor of species like the dog, the bear, and the butterfly, which contrasts with other species that are generally loathed and have served as figures in the logic of dehumanization, such as insects. "Insects are the human Other," says Lore Segal whose story is part of a literary revival of texts that move the world's "less perfect creatures" (Aristotle) onto centre-stage, including Ravi Hage's *Cockroach* and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*.

Apart from a few exceptions (such as Middelhoff's essay) the primary focus of *Mensch und Tier in Reflexionen des Exils* is on exile during the Third Reich. Yet this volume has a special relevance for our age in which millions are driven from their homes, the right continue to adopt the rhetoric of dehumanization, and social integration in places of exile poses great challenges. These links between the Nazi years and current times are hinted at but left unaddressed by the book. One would thus hope for further reflections on human-animal relations in exile, specifically for studies that build theoretical and representational links between the Third Reich and contemporary scenarios of forced migration (such as the Ukraine crisis) and their biopolitics.